

Fly responsibly with wildlife in mind:  
Important information on coastal overflight regulations.

Many pilots are not aware of the drastic effects low overflights can have on seabird colonies. There are both 2000 ft AGL recommendations and 1000 ft AGL regulations to prevent low overflights above California marine sanctuary waters. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game also maintain regulations preventing disturbance to wildlife from aircraft. Currently the FAA recognizes the 2000 ft AGL recommendation on aeronautical charts. This notice to pilots is to provide information on these regulations and tips on how best to avoid wildlife disturbance.

Significant seabird populations nest along the North-central California coast. Seabirds depend on the nutrient-rich waters of this area, including Farallon Islands and offshore of Point Reyes, which supports the largest concentrations of breeding seabirds in the contiguous United States. Together with humans and marine mammals, seabirds are top predators in our local marine food chains making them important indicators of health within the marine ecosystem.

Seabirds are long-lived animals with low reproductive rates and are susceptible to climate variability, prey availability and oceanic conditions. It is critical that breeding is successful as often as possible. To breed successfully and maintain populations, seabirds have evolved to nest in areas such as offshore rocks, islands, and steep mainland cliffs that are inaccessible to most land predators. Some seabird species are highly site-specific, returning each year to the same nest site or colony. Young birds often return to the colony where they were born.

Human-caused disturbance negatively effects seabird populations. Disturbance events, such as a low flying aircraft, can lead to increased stress levels, higher energy costs, and the disruption of critical seabird behaviors like finding an adequate nesting site, nest defense, and the feeding of young. This may lead to chick loss or abandonment, increased predation, or colony abandonment. Severe disturbance that causes abandonment of nests or colonies can potentially result in several years of lost reproduction. Signs of a disturbance include head bobbing, wing flapping, alert postures, and “flushing” or flying off nests. However, pilots can minimize these impacts to seabirds by maintaining 2000 ft AGL when flying along the coast.

The Seabird Colony Protection Program has been created to improve the survival of seabirds on the North-central California coast by educating coastal users, such as pilots, on how they can help reduce disturbance to this important symbol of our ocean’s productivity and health. The Seabird Colony Protection Program offers free presentations to pilot clubs, flight schools, or any interested parties. The program can also provide outreach materials for airports or pilot stores. Please contact Sarah Ratzesberger at [sarah.ratzesberger@noaa.gov](mailto:sarah.ratzesberger@noaa.gov), (415) 561-6622 x200, for a media packet, to schedule a presentation, or to request outreach materials. For more information, please visit the program’s pilot page at <http://farallones.noaa.gov/pilots.html>.